



Imperial and Chase County, Nebraska A DEVELOPMENT SUCCESS STORY

Fall 2013

Introduction. Chase County is located in extreme Southwest Nebraska. A part of the high plains, the community is rural, relatively small and is geographically closer to the Denver Front Range metropolitan area than Lincoln, Nebraska's capital. Chase County is farming and ranching dependent, but it has built a vibrant economy and a "can-do" community development attitude. A key to its success is good visionary leadership and leaders—both public and private—who collaborate and work well together.

Chase County and Imperial, the largest city and county seat, is a community on the edge. Between 1970 and 2009 the county population dropped by 12% from a little more than 4,000 to about 3,600 residents. It has recently reached a critical tipping point with annual deaths now exceeding births, but this is a community with hope. "Downtown" Imperial is both active and

interesting. The community's entrepreneurial talent is illustrated by remarkable businesses both on and off the farm including everything from diversified agriculture to telecommunications companies such as Allo Communications.

This community has invested in a dual development strategy focused on smart economic development coupled with serious investment in quality of life assets through sound community development. Chase County is winning its future by the actions it is taking today. Our story is organized into two sections: the first section provides a chronology of development beginning in the 1970s progressing to spring 2010; the second section shares some important economic indicator trend data illustrating specifically how this community is succeeding.

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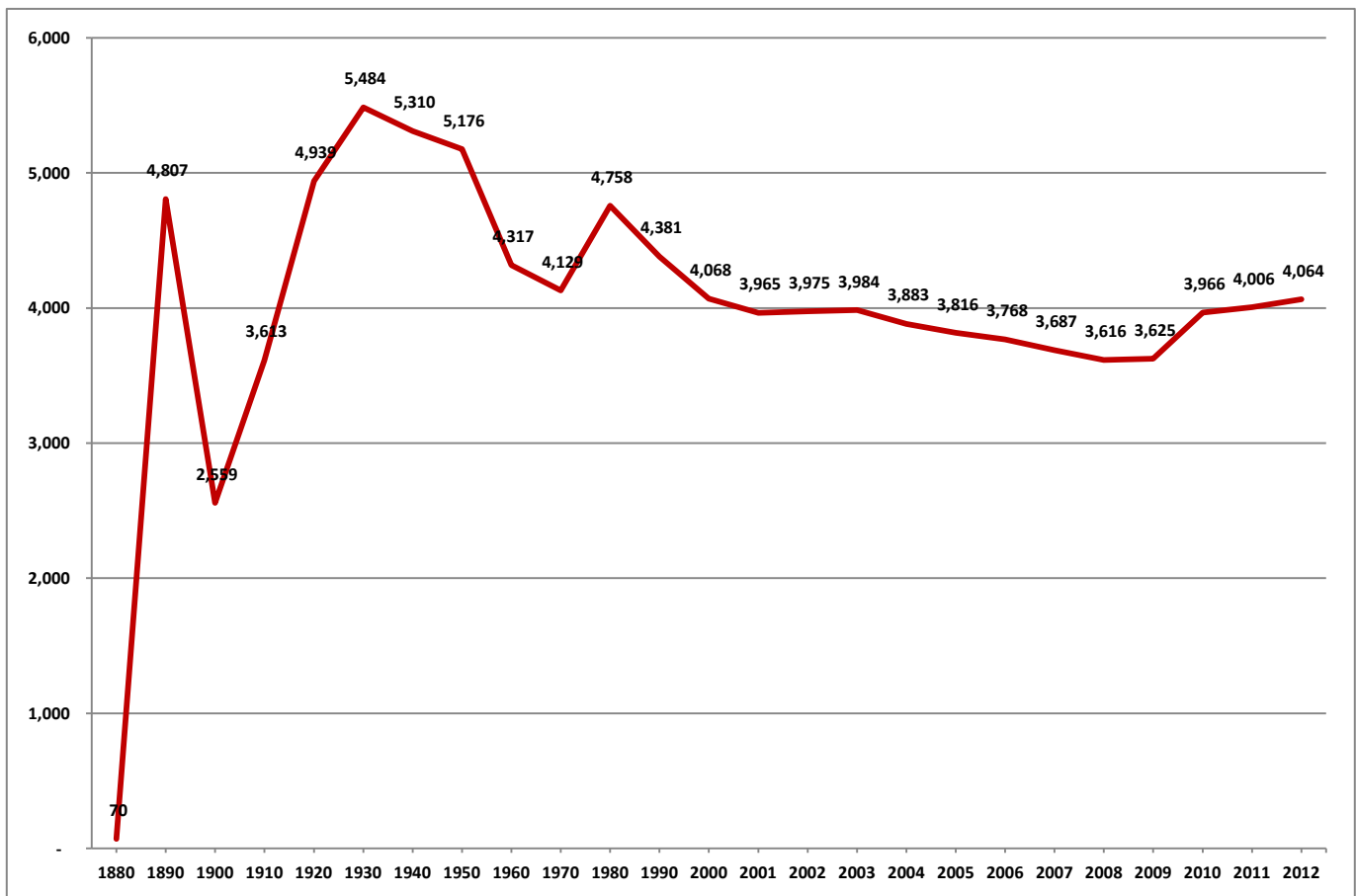
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Proof in the Trend Lines

No community is ever truly secure in their future. Every day, year in and year out, communities must assume the responsibility for their development. Acting with vision and developing smart strategies that are well-resourced and worked hard are key to ensuring a community's future in this ever changing world. Looking through the scope of world timelines, Imperial and Chase County are really very young: Imperial first showed up on the U.S. Census with 70 residents in 1880.

As in other parts of the Great Plains, Chase County saw a dramatic boom in development during its first decade of life. Between the 1880 census and 1890 census, the county swelled from a mere 70 residents to over 4,800. This boom was followed by a bust in the 1890s, with population levels dropping to just under 2,600 residents. Following this boom and bust decade, came a sustained period of development and growth all the way to the 1930 Census and the

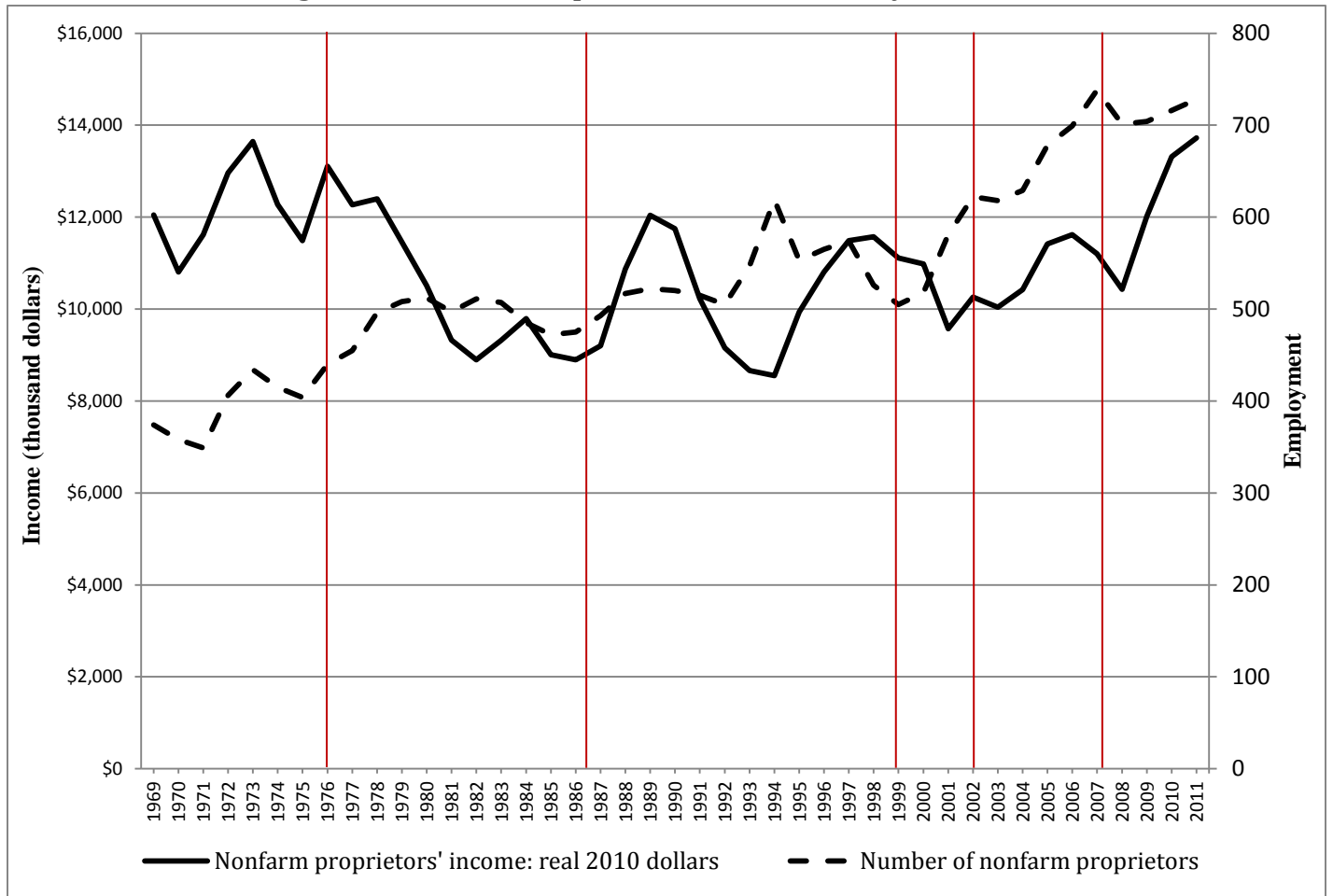
Fig. 1 – Historical Population of Chase County, Nebraska



Great Depression. This community experienced chronic and moderate depopulation between 1930 and 1970 as production agriculture mechanized and consolidated reducing both farm and off-farm labor needs.

There was a short rebound with the introduction of center pivot irrigation in the 1970s and 1980s which was then followed by continued population loss and the ever-present challenge of fighting for a future.

Fig. 2 – Nonfarm Proprietors, Chase County, Nebraska

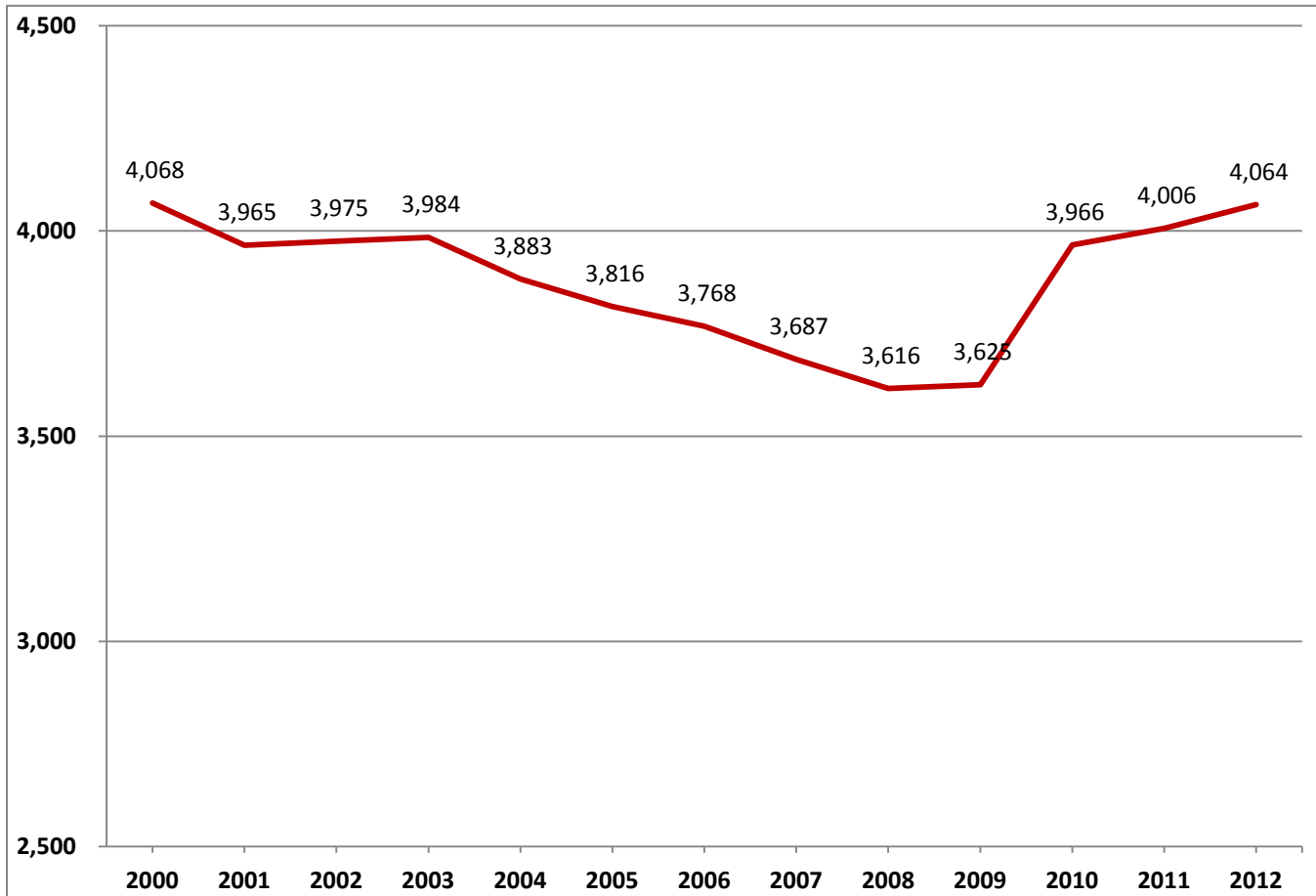


Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, July 2011

Depopulation continued for Chase County in the 2000s dropping from 4,068 in 2000 to 3,616 by 2008 (loss of 452 residents or 11%). But then things changed, combined develop efforts began to reverse the decline with population gains in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. Chase County has nearly gained back what it lost in the 2000-2008 period. Growth by companies like Allo Communications and the regions agricultural cooperative, the strong farm economy and a

vibrant main street suggest continued population rebound is possible. This evidence suggests that the dual focus on area entrepreneurs and quality of life are working. Bottom line few rural counties in the Great Plains (outside of oil development counties) are witnessing population growth. Chase County and the community of Imperial continue to hold insights on the formula for success for other struggling communities.

Fig. 3 – Contemporary Population of Chase County, Nebraska



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, August 2013

During the recent decade Chase County has seen a gradual decline in population, but the decline has been slow in comparison to other like-sized communities in the Great Plains. The 2010 Census confirms that Chase County and Imperial are succeeding in attracting new residents and retaining existing residents through business growth.

For the first time in many decades, Chase County has documented positive population growth for 2010. This evidence suggests that its development game plan is working and offers the hope that with continued investment and effort, this community will continue to succeed well into the 21st century.

Imperial, Nebraska

Chronology of Development

1970s	Advances in irrigation and increased employment opportunities during the 70s lead to a significant influx of new residents, energizing the community.
1980s	After a tragic accident resulted in the death of 4 local teens, the community rallied to purchase and revitalize the old movie theater . The Imperial Theatre continues to be operated primarily by community volunteers .
1991	Chase County School opens in new K-12 Building.
1999	Imperial Community Foundation Fund established as an affiliate of the Nebraska Community Foundation.
2000	City of Imperial created and funded Community Development Director Position.
2002 Nov	Mid-Plains Community College begins offering classes through an extended campus presence in Imperial.
2003	Allo Communications, LLC , a telecommunications business is started by Brad Moline, a returning Chase County resident and Russ Pankonin, a long-time Imperial resident, creating job opportunities and starting a second significant influx of new and returning residents bringing new energy and new ideas to the community.
2004	Chase-Perkins County Partnership formed through Hometown Competitiveness. This was HTC's first multi-county/regional effort.
2005	Voters pass \$250,000 bond issue for a new city fire truck.
2006 Jan	Imperial Community Foundation accepts Hunt Challenge.
2006 Apr	\$9,000 grant awarded to Chase-Perkins County Partnership as part of Building Entrepreneurial Communities Act (BECA).
2006 May	Dedication of the \$1 million expansion and renovation of the Lied Imperial Public Library. Project funded solely by grants and local donations raised over a 10 year period by a committed group of citizens.
2006 Nov	Voters pass LB840 (Local Option Municipal Economic Development Act) in the general election. The act aims

Elna Johnson, who has lived in the community for over 60 years once reminded her fellow citizens at a meeting, "We need to remember that what we have now didn't just happen, it was due to the planning and sacrifice of previous generations." What she means is that small towns like Imperial exist because somebody chose to create them.

To early entrepreneurs like Imperial's Thomas Mercier, the Great American Desert was the land of Great American Opportunity. Imperial has simply managed to retain that spirit of innovation and welcoming change into the 21st century.

It may be fair to say that the fervor with which residents of Chase County go about their civic and community events is directly responsible for their thriving economic development. City and county citizens work hard to make Imperial an exciting place to be. There are countless examples of ways residents of Chase County invest their creative and voluntary energies back into Chase County. These energies set the tone for the rest of community life, and large and small businesses are no exception.

2007 Apr	\$8,115 grant awarded to Chase-Perkins County Partnership as part of Building Entrepreneurial Communities Act (BECA).
2007 Aug	Imperial Community Foundation reaches Hunt Challenge goal of \$150,000 sixteen months ahead of schedule.
2007	Imperial Community Foundation holds second annual meeting and award \$5,000 in grants to area projects and programs; “Youth Leaders in Longhorn Country,” an outgrowth of the HTC task force, forms and holds first event; “Star Builders” club established.
2007 Sep	City of Imperial completes \$745,000 downtown project including new sidewalks, water mains and services.
2008	Mid-Plains Community College and Chase County Schools come together to plan 5th year Associates’ Degree “Career Academy” program at Chase County High School.
2008 Aug	Chase, Hayes and Perkins Counties, in conjunction Mid-Plains Community College awarded \$43,000 for training and support programs to strengthen economic development capacity and recruit new residents for a five-county area.
2009 May	Mid-Plains Community College moves into its new and expanded location. New swimming pool complex opens as part of \$2 million sports and recreation project made possible through a collaboration between the Chase County Schools and the City of Imperial.
2009 Aug	70-plus acre tract of land purchased by Imperial’s Economic Development Program to provide space for new and expanding businesses and development of additional housing.
2010 Feb	Participate in Entrepreneurship Coaching Training through HTC, City funds and hires a part-time business coach.
2010	Imperial signs up for a state program to create more entrepreneurship resources within its library.
2010 Nov	City of Imperial completes \$2.1 million street renovation project.
2010 Dec	Imperial Community Foundation passed the half-million mark, sitting at \$578,000, with 96% permanently endowed. A total of 20 businesses use Imperial’s business coaching services in 2010.
2011 Mar	Chase County Schools, Mid-Plains Community College and Allo Communications unveil the “Allo Model” available to 5th Year Career Academy Students; Senior Living Complex incorporates a child care center into its services.
2012	The County successfully manages a transition in development staffing.
2012	Population rebound continues and personal income reaches record highs.

“**We believe that successful economic development requires a long-term community commitment to the whole package: playgrounds, updated infrastructure, business programs, day care, etc. How can we attract the investment of new residents, entrepreneurs and businesses, if we are not willing to invest in the future of our community?**”

**Leslie Carlholm
Community
Development Director
City of Imperial**

Leveraging Outside Resources

REAP

Imperial's small businesses have sought and continue to utilize the assistance of the Rural Enterprise Assistance Project (REAP), a program of the Center for Rural Affairs. REAP helps individuals who are either thinking about starting a small business or who already operate a small business in Nebraska.

Based on the Grameen model of microlending, through REAP entrepreneurs can write a business plan, research potential markets and marketing ideas, discuss management issues with experienced business specialists, and apply for small business loans.

Since 1990, REAP has provided business development services to over 10,000 micro businesses, or businesses with five or fewer employees. Contact REAP Program Director Jeff Reynolds at 402.656.3091 or jeffr@cfra.org for more information.

EDGE

Imperial began offering EDGE classes in 2005, and by February of the next year 12 participants had graduated from the program. Like REAP, EDGE also provides entrepreneurial training and business planning.

Through NxLevel Education Foundation curricula, EDGE walks participants through business planning, management and marketing strategies and preparations for business growth and succession. EDGE, or Economic Development and Growth Enterprise, is a service of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Since 1993, NebraskaEDGE has helped over 2,500 individuals seeking growth options for their small businesses in Nebraska communities.

Small Business Development Centers

Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) are a service of the Small Business Administration (SBA) and are designed to help both new and prospective business owners, either online or in brick-and-mortar offices.

SBDCs can help entrepreneurs solve financial, marketing, production, organization, engineering and technical problems. They can also assist with feasibility studies.

The SBA offers information on small business loans, grants, bonds and other financial assistance. While SBA does not make loans directly, it does offer assistance with loan applications.

All services given at SBDCs are free and confidential. Learn more by visiting the Small Business Administration website at www.sba.gov.

Pooling Limited Resources

By working together, communities in the Chase County region have provided education and technical assistance to area businesses and beginning entrepreneurs that they would not have been able to otherwise.

The communities of Imperial, Grant and Madrid, along with Great Plains Communications (forming the Chase-Perkins Partnership) collaborated on two Building Entrepreneurial Communities Act grants in 2006 and 2007. As a result of the BECA grants the communities have trained additional HomeTown Competitiveness volunteers, implemented a leadership development class, hosted a yearly Shop Local campaign and a youth entrepreneurship day, and held workshops on business transitions, marketing/advertising and customer service.

"I think one of the main reasons these partnerships have worked so well," says Community Development Director Leslie Carlholm, "Is that we all tend to live by the maxim, 'There is no limit to what can be accomplished if it doesn't matter who gets the credit.'"

Another entrepreneurial success story from Imperial can be found on our website. Follow the link to read more about Western Nebraska's own information technology provider, [Allo Communications](#).

MPCC Center for Enterprise

Through Mid-Plains Community College, the Center for Enterprise offers services such as business coaching, professional training and development, and employee skill testing.

In 2008, the CFE approached the SWNCBC and the Chase-Perkins Partnership with the idea to develop the Partnership into an entity focused on building regional capacity in the five-county region. The new Southwest Nebraska Business Innovation Network was able to offer expanded training opportunities to the region.

Today the CFE aids the community by identifying the needs of Imperial's business community and offering training to meet those needs in areas such as marketing, accounting, and social media. It also provides customized job training to local businesses, including assistance in writing job training grants.

SWNCBC

The Southwest Nebraska Community Betterment Corporation, or SWNCBC, began in 1999 with the goal of bringing quality affordable housing to Perkins County. Now expanded to cover Chase and three other counties, the Corporation is also involved in business recruitment and retention, business support and education, tourism enhancement, technology enhancement, and other community betterment programs.

MPCC Imperial Extended Campus

A branch of Mid-Plains Community College, Imperial's extended campus provides local access to affordable post-secondary education, encouraging the better-educated workforce needed to grow Imperial's business community.

From the beginning, the Imperial Extended Campus has worked to bring quality classes and workshops to the area that benefits small businesses. It has also assisted in locating instructors for events such as a region-wide workshop.

Questions & More Information

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The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship's mission is to help community leaders build a prosperous future by supporting and empowering business, social and civic entrepreneurs. With our roots and hearts in rural America, we help communities of all sizes and interests by bringing empowering research, community engagement and strategy development to you through our many Solution Areas. Our **Solution Area Teams** empower communities to discover their own answers to the challenges and opportunities they face:

- **Community Development Philanthropy:** Providing research and community engagement strategies that help communities build philanthropic capacity and create development resources now and in the future.
- **Youth Engagement:** Providing tools and a framework for communities to engage young people now and to bring them home in the future.
- **Measurement Research Policy:** Providing the tools to help communities define development goals, measure success and improve outcomes.
- **Entrepreneurial Communities:** Providing a roadmap for communities to design and deliver entrepreneur-focused economic development strategies that work.

To learn more about us, go to www.energizingentrepreneurs.org.

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